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ABSTRACT

A theory of teaching creative writing that involves preconscious learning is presented in this paper. Following a review of the literature on methods of developing writing ability, the paper describes a three-step creative process of preparation (the gathering and study of appropriate materials), incubation (the preconscious absorption and shaping of these materials), and illumination (the insight that provides shape, meaning, and originality to the material). The discussion emphasizes the third step, illumination, and the necessity for quieting the left hemisphere (cognitive portion) of the brain to free the right hemisphere (imagery-producing portion) of the brain to stimulate artistic or theoretical creativity. Meditation is suggested as an effective way of controlling left hemisphere "chatter." (AEA)

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WORDS OUT OF SILENCE

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At a meeting recently of the across-the-curriculum writing group at my university, we were having a discussion about how people learn to write in which those who favored more traditional methods were setting forth the feelings they were having about some of the ideas that had been advanced at the initial conference, ideas which reflected the work of Emig, Britton, Murray, and so on. As a teacher of mathematics was explaining what it was that he tried to teach his students to do in phrasing word problems, it suddenly became clear to me that what he wanted to do was teach his students how to think. When I asked him if he thought that people can in fact be taught how to think, he reflected a moment, and then said that what he was doing was like teaching people how to run--you can't teach them how, but you can teach them how to do it more effectively. A teacher of philosophy who, understandably I think, seemed a bit perturbed, insisted we can indeed teach students how to think, but after a few words from one of the discussion leaders, the topic was dropped.

When I thought about it afterwards, I decided that the matter was of crucial importance, not only for teachers in other fields, but also for teachers of English. Just as surely as you cannot teach students how to think, you cannot teach them how to write. We can, of course, teach such matters as punctuation, subject verb agreement, and sentence combining, but it is impossible to teach students how to write--all you can do is to teach them some helpful skills and then foster, not teach, writing itself. You can't teach writing, not only because it involves an extraordinary number of variables, but for the much more consequential reason that the process is only partly a conscious one.

I decided that for the presentation we were supposed to work up for the project, I would do some research into the subject of creativity to find the substantiation I needed to persuade my colleagues that they cannot teach writing. It seemed to me that if that became clear, then it might be obvious that certain kinds of methods, such as teaching rhetorical principles, can only be incidental to the process and other ways of developing writing ability would clearly appear to be more appropriate and effective. So I read Arieti, Barron, Guilford, Koestler, Getzels, May, Maslow, Rogers, Bruner, and MacKinnon, among others, and in the process came across all kinds of fascinating matters, such as MacKinnon's discovery that writers of consequence almost all have not only a high degree of psychopathology, but also are extremely high in ego strength, a fact which seems to indicate that Ernest Kris' famous thesis that the artist is someone who engages in regression in the service of the ego might have more substance than people like Rollo May believe. However, more to the point, most of these researchers into the nature of creativity were, in one way or another, saying what I had expected them to say. Lawrence Kubie put the matter clearly in his article "Blocks to Creativity."

Educators, says Kubie, have many useful functions to perform, including finding ways of resolving unconscious conflicts and needs so that they will not distort the learning process, but "that we do not need to be taught to think. In fact, thinking cannot be taught. The function of education is rather to show us how not to interfere with the thinking capacity which is inherent in the human mind."[1] The fact of the matter, he says is that we learn not consciously, but preconsciously:

> The input of fragmentary perceptual data from the world around us is overwhelmingly preconscious. This constitutes an incessant subliminal bombardment which goes on when we are awake and when we are asleep. The same is true for the most highly organized

material. This has been demonstrated by experiments on the learning process under hypnosis, which indicate that our conscious intake is only a small fragment of our simultaneous preconscious intake, i.e., that process intake and recall occurs without conscious awareness. Furthermore, we know now that what the brain acquires preconsciously it also processes preconsciously, which is just another way of saying that all learning and thinking are preconscious rather than conscious processes.[2]

Conscious processes, says Kubie, are important for checking, correcting, and communication, but since all consequential recording, processing, and creating happens preconsciously, we must learn how to use the preconscious.

If what Kubie is saying is true, and the evidence seems overwhelming that it is, then the question for teachers of writing is how to make use of the preconscious. The obvious problem is how to get in touch with it.

In every description of creative discovery that I read about, the moment of illumination came during times of silence, reverie, or--as with Einstein--during the performance of a simple task such as shaving. Prior to the moment of intuition, insight, or discovery, however, there are, as Graham Wallas said in his famous paradigm of the creative process, two preliminary steps. The first, preparation, involves the gathering and study of appropriate materials, and the second, incubation, the preconscious absorption and shaping of these materials. Neither step can be omitted. The Bohemias of the West are full of would-be writers who assume that the process begins with the moment of illumination. In order to get something out of the oven, however, something has to be put in. Since the second step, incubation, is not conscious at any point many teachers of writing forget its importance and have students start writing before the preconscious has

done enough work. Students who churn out papers at the last moment often discover that what they have done is half-baked. The third step, the moment of illumination, which provides shape, meaning, and originality to the material, is my primary concern, for unless the writer experiences something of the sort, his work is almost inevitably going to be of little consequence, either to himself or to others. Much attention has been given, from Plato onward, to the nature of this moment of illumination, but not until the recent research into the operations of the brain has it been possible to say much of substance. Most of us nowadays have some familiarity with the differences in function in the left and right hemispheres of the brain. (A readable account can be found in Robert Ornstein's The Psychology of Consciousness.) To put it simply, the left hemisphere contains the centers that handle linear, analytical, verbal, and arithmetical functions, while the right hemisphere is concerned with musical ability, geometric forms, holistic thinking, and the production of imagery.

It is the thesis of J.C. Gowan's article, "Incubation, Imagery, and Creativity," which appeared in the Journal of Mental Imagery in 1978, that the moment of illumination is connected to the imagery-producing function of the right hemisphere. This imagery appears in dreams, hypnosis, hypnogogic, and hypnopompic states, but such imagery also comes to consciousness in such normal states as "daydreaming, fantasy, meditation, creative spells, relaxation, sensory deprivation, and the like, where the ego and full memorability are present."[3] The left hemisphere is constantly involved in cognitive activity, i.e., "the handling of incoming perceptual information and its processing into thought and decision via language, and the continuing stream of discourse which accompanies consciousness."[4] Hence, if the source of creativity--the imagery produced by the right hemisphere--is to come to the surface and be

available to consciousness, the incessant "chatter" of the left hemisphere must be stopped or reduced. In order to achieve this, the sensory input into the left hemisphere must be significantly lowered. Gowan asserts that "learning how to do this is obviously a new educational challenge, if we are to educate both halves of the brain and hence stimulate creativity in young people."[5]

Gowan quotes Khatena, who has done an immense amount of research into the mechanics of the creative process, to the effect that "Much of brain activity relative to the creative imagination has to do with imagery or the re-experiencing of images."[6] Therefore, says Gowan, knowledge of some particular subject or experience is a necessary, but "not a sufficient condition for creative production. The sufficient condition...is incubation and the production of imagery, or at least the ability to allay left hemisphere production enough to pay some conscious attention to it [the imagery]. Failure to acquire this ability is apparently what keeps some gifted persons from becoming creative, so in this sense, creativity can be taught."[7]

The psychiatrist, Silvano Arieti, in his book Creativity, the Magic Synthesis, a necessary work for anyone interested in the subject, says that there are essentially nine socio-cultural factors which help stimulate creativity. Among these are openness to cultural stimuli, stress on becoming and not on just being, freedom, and tolerance for diverging views.[8] Since, as he points out, almost all of the crucial factors are characteristic of American culture, some other explanation as to why Americans are not a very creative people is necessary. A part of the explanation, he thinks, is that Americans are too concerned with doing rather than with creating, particularly artistic and theoretical creation. However, he sees the basic reason to be the shortcomings of parents, who, he says, wish to foster creativity in their

children but do just the opposite: "Many parents have inhibiting anxieties, such as worrying whether their children will appear unusual, introverted, peculiar. They are more concerned with external success and popularity than with inner growth and creativity....In a society where economic competition is so important, most parents first of all want to make sure that their children, once grown up, will be self-supporting."[9] It would be an unusual English teacher in this country who does not find plenty of reason to agree with Arieti, though less so now perhaps than in the past. Still, it might well be that even when American students are interested in transcending their cultural limitations, they are not as creative as they might otherwise be because of the lack of approved methods by which they can gain access to their creative selves. Any teacher who told his students to sit still for ten minutes and daydream, fantasize, or meditate would, I suspect, be soon made to feel that he was guilty of some violation of whatever is left of the Protestant ethic.

However, it is obviously not just the American ethos. Gowan makes the interesting point that the variability of creativity far exceeds the variability of other traits and abilities, such as height, cranial capacity, intelligence, mental age, and memory span. The variability limit of all other characteristics is 2.818 to one, whereas in the creative production of such geniuses as Mozart the ratio is 100/1 or more. In some cases at least, he argues, the reason for such an extraordinary ratio must be a failure to learn and practice a method of quiting left hemisphere function.[10] However, it may be, the possibility is so strong as to make it almost mandatory for teachers to attempt to give their students some methods for toning down the activity of the left hemisphere. Certainly this should be so for teachers of writing who want their students to go beyond the repetition of commonplaces

of one sort or another. Obviously I have in mind something more than what is called creative writing; all writing should to some extent, at least, be creative.

Probably the most effective way of controlling left hemisphere chatter is by means of meditation. For teachers who either practice meditation or are interested in the subject, Lawrence Le Shan's How to Meditate and Ram Dass' (Richard Alpert) Journey to Awakening both describe techniques that can easily be used either in or out of the classroom. The method that I have my students use is very simple; they merely close the eyes and become aware of their breathing. What happens is that the left hemisphere pays attention to the breathing, and the right brain, if it has any business, can go about it without any disturbance. There is, incidentally, evidence from EEG tests that most people are dominant in either the left or the right side of the brain. Students whose right brains are dominant usually take to meditation quite easily, but the left dominants should probably be given a technique that requires some vigorous use of the left hemisphere, as concentration on a complex visual design such as a mandala. This makes them think that they are working. It should be obvious that such techniques are most effectively used after the student has worked up his topic and has spent some time with it, but it is also helpful--I have certainly found it so--in finding subjects to write about. Teachers often talk about the importance of self-generated topics, but topics arrived at in this way are self-generated in a profound sense. For teachers who are not particularly interested in experimenting with meditation, I would suggest that they urge their students to daydream, to fantasize, or better yet, as Whitman put it, "to loaf and invite the soul."

Not only should teachers of writing try to find ways of helping their students to gain access to their creative selves, but, it seems to me, they should also be aware of the significance of the fact that creativity is a preconscious activity in respect to the choice of textbooks and teaching methods. There are all kinds of implications, but I would make only two points. First, many teachers of composition still hold firmly to the belief that essays can be classified as expository, descriptive, narrative, and argumentative and they try to teach the characteristics of each type and have students write to the prescriptions. I hope that it is clear that since such distinctions are logical left hemisphere categories which the creative aspect of the self knows nothing about, imposing such distinctions almost automatically guarantees that creativity will be reduced. The right approach, I think, is to start with the topic, however worked up, and let the preconscious make the decisions about methods of development.

As for textbooks, both simplistic prescriptive manuals and sophisticated rhetorics should be used with caution, for both pretend that they can teach writing. There is, of course, no reason why the useful information in such books should not become part of the material that the right hemisphere works on, but it is only when what they have to impart accords with what the preconscious knows that they have much value. Recently, for reasons that I am no longer sure about, I used one of the latest textbooks on composition, an immensely thoughtful work by a leading theoretician, which described the structure of various types of writing with much sublety. The only trouble was that the preconscious processes of my students diverged considerably from the processes recommended in the text. Worse, I suppose, was that mine did too.

It does seem to me that with what we now know about creativity, the fostering of writing can become almost a pleasure, rather than the desperate and losing struggle that many of us have engaged in for so long. Others, I know, have been wiser. I would end with a poem that beautifully sums up in three stanzas most of what I have been saying. In the first two stanzas of "The Long Legged Fly," Yeats makes clear that the first two steps in the creative process--preparation and incubation--are completed, and now both Caesar and Helen are waiting in silence, minds delicately poised on the silent stream of preconscious imagery, waiting for the moment of illumination. In the last stanza, the stage of illumination has been reached; Michelangelo is receiving insight after insight as he paints the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel:

That civilisation may not sink,
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
to a distant post;
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topless towers be burnt
And men recall that face,
Move most gently if move you must
In this lonely place.
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
That nobody looks; her feet
Practices a tinker shuffle
Picked up on a street.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find
the first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out.

There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

[1] International Science and Technology, June, 1965, 69-78; Rpt. in Explorations in Creativity, ed. Ross Mooney and Taher A. Razik (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) p. 41.

[2] Kubie, p. 41.

[3] 2, p. 24.

[4] Gowan, p. 24.

[5] Gowan, p. 25.

[6] Gowan, p. 27.

[7] Gowan, p. 27.

[8] (New York: Basic Books, 1976) p. 324.

[9] Arieti, pp. 361-62.

[10] Gowan, p. 27.